



[Missouri legislature sends redistricting, campaign finance, and lobbying measure to voters with changes to 2018 citizen initiative](#)

On Wednesday, the Missouri House approved Senate Joint Resolution 38 that would amend Article III of the Missouri Constitution to change or repeal certain provisions of Missouri Amendment 1 passed in 2018. The House approved the amendment in a vote of 98-56. The Senate approved the amendment in a vote of 22-9 on February 10. The amendment will go be for Missouri voters in November.

The amendment would enact the following changes:

- eliminate the nonpartisan state demographer and instead use a bipartisan redistricting commission appointed by the governor again;
- alter the criteria used to draft district maps;
- change the threshold of lobbyist gifts from \$5 to \$0; and
- lower the contribution limit for state senate campaigns from \$2,500 to \$2,400.

Missouri Amendment 1 (2018) was a citizen initiative approved with 62 percent of the vote. Amendment 1 created a position called the non-partisan state demographer, which was tasked with drawing state legislative districts. Amendment 1 required the state demographer and commissions to consider specific criteria, including what the initiative calls partisan fairness and competitiveness, contiguousness, compactness, and the boundaries of political subdivisions. SJR 38 would require that population size, adherence to voting rights laws, compactness, and county unity have a higher priority than partisan fairness and competitiveness in the criteria used for redistricting.

Amendment 1 also prohibited the Missouri State Legislature from passing laws allowing for unlimited campaign contributions to candidates for the state legislature. Amendment 1 established campaign contribution limits for legislative candidates and their committees for a single election cycle to \$2,500 per person to a state Senate candidate and \$2,000 per person to a state House candidate.

The 2018 initiated constitutional amendment was sponsored by Clean Missouri. The coalition of committees in support of the amendment raised \$5.63 million, including \$1.01 million from the Action Now Initiative and \$1.00 million from the National Education Association. The Missourians First and Advance Missouri PACs, which registered to oppose Amendment 1, raised \$343,201.

In Missouri, the state legislature can refer state statutes and constitutional amendments to the ballot for voter consideration. Both amendments and statutes require a simple majority vote of legislators to be placed on the ballot.

Between 1996 and 2018, about 63 percent (52 of 82) of the total number of measures that appeared on statewide ballots were approved, and about 37 percent (30 of 82) were defeated.

Between 2006 and 2019, 73.33 percent of the 30 constitutional amendments on Missouri ballots were approved.

House Plan Bars Lobbyists, Politics Groups From Small Firm Aid

House Democrats are adding provisions to their next major stimulus bill to bar lobbyists and political groups from coronavirus relief funds for small businesses under the popular Paycheck Protection Program.

Changes in an [amendment](#) to the Democrats' \$3 trillion plan for the next round of stimulus reflect concerns that the aid money could go to lobbyists while Democrats seek to expand eligibility for the loans to an array of non-profit groups.

The changes, which are backed by leadership and are expected to make it into the Democrats' final proposal, would bar businesses and other groups from counting the compensation of federally registered lobbyists when calculating how much aid the firms can access.

It would also disqualify groups that have or will spend money on elections or political advocacy in the current election cycle on the federal, state or local level. The House is scheduled to vote on the bill Friday.

The Democrats' proposal, which was unveiled on Tuesday, would allow more non-profits to get funds under the loan program. That could permit many political groups, tourism bureaus, chambers of commerce and trade organizations that seek to influence laws and regulations to seek relief, though the amendment limits how those groups can access the funds.

The proposed bill would make several changes to the PPP, the centerpiece of the Trump administration's \$2.2 trillion relief package enacted in March. The program offers loans to small businesses of up to \$10 million and was designed to be a short-term lifeline to keep businesses afloat until they can reopen. The loans convert to grants if the money is spent mostly on payroll in eight weeks.

Among the changes in the amendment are lengthening the period for spending the money to 24 weeks, scrapping a requirement that at least 75% be spent on payroll, and setting aside funding for firms with 10 or fewer employees. The amendment would also allow loans to be spent on personal protective equipment or supplies needed to protect the health and safety of employees.

The House measure faces steep odds in the Senate, which is controlled by Republicans.

[Rivera didn't register as foreign agent in \\$50 million contract with Venezuela oil firm](#)

When news broke of former Congressman David Rivera's \$50 million contract with an oil company owned by Venezuela's socialist government, heads turned not only because the Miami Republican has a well-earned reputation as a vocal crusader against communist Cuba.

The consulting contract — now at the center of a new lawsuit between him and a subsidiary of Venezuela's state-controlled oil company in the U.S. — has also caught the interest of federal prosecutors and the FBI, sources said.

The central question: Did Rivera register as a foreign agent with the Justice Department after signing the 2017 lobbying agreement with the Venezuelan subsidiary, PDV USA? The short answer: Rivera did not, according to department records.

Whether he broke the law is open to debate; however, former federal prosecutors and defense attorneys said Rivera should have registered as a foreign agent because he was clearly working for the Venezuelan government. His consulting contract was with the Venezuelan subsidiary of the national oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.*, or PDVSA.

"Absolutely yes," said Miami attorney William Norris, a former federal prosecutor who defended one of the so-called Cuban Five defendants in a 2000 spy trial. All five were convicted of being unregistered foreign agents of Fidel Castro, along with other crimes.

“Any prosecutor worth his salt would want to look very closely at it,” Norris said Thursday, adding that the incredible amount of Rivera’s consulting contract, \$50 million, suggests he was expected to use his political contacts in Washington to boost his client’s fortunes.

Rivera did not respond to a request for comment Thursday about why he did not register as a foreign agent in his representation of Venezuela’s oil subsidiary in America.

While thousands of lobbyists representing hundreds of countries register as foreign agents with the Justice Department, it is not uncommon for consultants to hide their services from the U.S. government. Among them: President Donald Trump’s former campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, who pleaded guilty in 2018 to violating the Foreign Agents Registration Act for failing to disclose his representation of the Ukraine government. Failing to register as a foreign agent with the Justice Department carries up to five years in prison.

The law, which took effect in 1938, has increasingly played a prominent role in the U.S. government’s efforts to block foreign-influence operations in the United States. Its primary purpose, according to the Justice Department, “is to ensure that the American public and our lawmakers know the source of information that is provided at the behest of a foreign principal, where that information may be intended to influence U.S. public opinion, policy, and laws.”

In the lawsuit filed Wednesday in New York federal court, lawyers for PDVSA’s oil subsidiary said Rivera’s company, Interamerican Consulting Inc., was hired to help improve its reputation in America amid an economic collapse in Venezuela. That national oil giant was then under the control of socialist President Nicolás Maduro, who has been reviled by U.S. politicians in the same way as Castro, who was close to Maduro’s predecessor, the late Hugo Chavez.

The breach-of-contract suit, [first reported by the New York Times](#), seeks \$15 million back from Rivera’s firm — the down payment on what was supposed to be a three-month, \$50 million contract.

Reached by the Miami Herald on Wednesday, Rivera would not comment on the specifics of his contract or whether he had taken a paycheck to represent a company controlled by a socialist government.

But, in text messages, he gave a murky explanation, hinting at a scheme to fund Maduro foes with proceeds from the oil consulting contract.

“All those funds went to the opposition for anti-Maduro protests in the summer of 2017. I never saw a penny of it. That’s all I know.”

Rivera also added that the Trump administration, including the National Security Council and State Department, “were aware of everything.”

It is unclear how the Maduro-led government chose Rivera to help prop up the image of its oil subsidiary in the United States. Both Maduro and Venezuela would seem to make an odd pairing for Rivera.

A one-term Cuban-American congressman and former Florida legislator [whose career has been dogged](#) by ethics violations and [campaign finance investigations](#), Rivera once tried to expel a Venezuelan consul in Miami and is a close friend of U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, an arch critic of the Maduro administration. Rivera and Rubio shared a house in Tallahassee when they were both in the state Legislature.

According to the lawsuit filed against Rivera’s consulting firm, the PDVSA subsidiary says it initially paid him \$15 million but that he produced only a couple of thin reports before the agreement was ended. His consulting firm “performed no meaningful services under the agreement,” the suit concludes. The PDVSA subsidiary is seeking to recover the \$15 million it paid to Interamerican Consulting between March and April of 2017, along with compensatory damages.

Despite the falling out, Rivera continued to try to obtain the \$35 million balance on his firm’s contract with the PDVSA subsidiary, to no avail, according to the suit.

The suit’s plaintiff, PDV USA, was controlled by the Maduro administration when it hired Rivera as a consultant — not the Venezuelan opposition political leadership, headed by Juan Guaidó. He is recognized as the interim president of Venezuela by the Trump administration, which last year imposed sanctions against the state-run oil company and its U.S. subsidiary, Citgo.

Lawyers for PDV USA said they are representing the Venezuelan oil subsidiary that is now under the control of Guaido, not Maduro. The subsidiary’s Washington law firm, Willkie, Farr & Gallagher, declined to comment about Rivera’s claim that he was actually working for Venezuela’s opposition group rather than for Maduro. The law firm emphasized that Maduro’s government had hired him as a consultant for PDV USA in 2017.

However little Rivera may have done for his Venezuelan oil client in America, the former congressman was spotted during the latter part of 2017 with one of Venezuela’s most politically connected businessmen, Raul Gorrín, the owner of a Caracas TV network and Maduro confidant.

Sources told el Nuevo Herald that Rivera joined Gorrín in Washington, D.C., in meetings with Trump administration officials to discuss the future of Venezuela and an exit strategy for Maduro.

Acting as a broker, the media mogul peddled the idea that Maduro and other key government leaders might be willing to negotiate a transition in Venezuela in exchange for amnesty, the sources said. [Gorrín's proposal: Maduro would hold a presidential election](#) and admit defeat to the opposition as long as enough guarantees were provided that once out of power he and other key government leaders would not face any legal repercussions.

During this same period, Gorrin's TV network, Globovision, retained the Republican lobbying firm, Ballard Partners, to assist in selling his plan in Washington.

But Gorrín's proposal gained no traction in the Trump administration, which proceeded to impose sanctions against Venezuelan businessmen and the state-run oil company. The U.S. Attorney's Office in Miami filed a [series of corruption cases against PDVSA officials and business people, including Gorrín](#), accusing them of stealing billions of dollars from the national oil company and transferring the money to Europe and South Florida, where they bought lavish homes.

[Bill could hide donor and lobbyist info from the public](#)

A bill pushed through the Legislature in the final days of the legislative session could prevent the public from knowing who is donating to political action committees or who lobbyists are working for, a move that would bring significant secrecy to the legislative process.

House Bill 3613 is now awaiting action by the governor, but if approved it could result in the state's electronic campaign reporting system being taken offline, according to Ashley Kemp, executive director of the state Ethics Commission.

The bill would prevent state agencies from collecting any information that "identifies a person as a member, supporter, or volunteer of, or donor of financial or nonfinancial support to, any entity organized pursuant to Section 501(c) of the United States Internal Revenue Code."

"It might mean we have to take down the online Guardian system," said Kemp, referring to the public website that allows people to search records for candidates, campaigns, lobbyists and political action committees.

Kemp said she would need more guidance on how to interpret the bill if it became law, but said it could create a “nightmare” situation not just for the Ethics Commission but other state agencies that collect affiliation information, such as the state medical board or the Oklahoma Bar Association.

The bill was sent to Gov. Kevin Stitt after approval by the Senate this week without any discussion or debate.

HB 3613 passed through both chambers by wide margins – 43 to 2 in the Senate, 77 to 13 in the House.

Rep. Terry O’Donnell, who coauthored the bill with Sen. Kim David, R-Porter, said he wants to protect the privacy of citizens who belong to political organizations.

“We are seeing more and more government intrusion into the privacy interests of citizens,” said O’Donnell, R-Catoosa.

O’Donnell said there is a provision in the bill that addresses Ethics Commission requirements, but Kemp said the language is not clear.

Political action committees currently must disclose contributions electronically through The Guardian system that may no longer be public if HB 3613 becomes law.

Lobbyists are required to report what organization or businesses they are working for but Kemp said the bill could prevent disclosure if a lobbyist represents a non profit entity.

“The language doesn’t seem very clear and is extremely broad but it seems to me that it would prevent us from asking for that information,” Kemp said.

Stitt has until Tuesday to act on the bill.

[Coronavirus putting future of state bills, grassroots efforts in jeopardy](#)

Across the country, statehouses were in the middle of their legislative sessions and in some cases, debating bills, budgets and other legislative measures that would reshape parts of the country as lawmakers settled into 2020.

Marijuana legalization, tougher gun control regulations, expanded voting rights and jail reform were all on the table in states such as California, Georgia, Kentucky and New York. Then the coronavirus pandemic hit -- putting a pause on all discussions not related to the pandemic.

As of Friday, 14 states have postponed their legislative sessions because of the pandemic, 23 have adjourned their sessions for weeks and 15 states haven't approved state budgets, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, a bipartisan nongovernmental organization that keeps track and advises statehouses.

Stella Rouse, the director of the Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement at the University of Maryland, told ABC News that the changes to the legislative process not only put those bills on pause, but also diminishes the power of constituents from participating in democracy.

"I think it's a pretty big problem," she told ABC News. "For lobbyists and other groups, a lot of their strategy is face-to-face meeting or catching [state leaders] in the hall and getting their ear. That's impossible now."

Advocacy groups big and small acknowledged they've hit roadblocks in their campaigns and activities over the last few months, but at the same time, the pandemic has forced them to get more creative with their missions.

Legislation on hold

Some states were able to complete many aspects of their sessions before March and passed comprehensive bills. Virginia's legislature, for example, passed several gun control bills, a bill that made Election Day a state holiday and ratified the Equal Rights Amendment.

In Georgia, the state Senate unanimously passed legislation known as the "Second Chance" bill that would have allowed former nonviolent felons the chance to ask a judge to expunge their record after a certain number of years of good behavior. The bill, which had bipartisan support, was awaiting approval in the Georgia House of Representatives, but the statehouse has been adjourned until June at the earliest.

Lisa McGahan, the policy lead at Georgia Justice Project which spearheaded the bill, said supporters are worried that leaders won't take it up for a vote and they'll have to restart the whole process again next year.

"We don't have any indication of where it's going and that affects our bill," she told ABC News.

Karen O'Keefe, the director of state policies for the Marijuana Policy Project, said they had a strong campaign to push for legalizing and regulating medical and recreational marijuana in several locations. Connecticut was poised to vote on legalizing the drug, but their state legislature was adjourned in March.

The Alabama state Senate and Kentucky House of Representatives both passed bills that would legalize medical marijuana, but even though both have reconvened, there is no indication that the other respective legislative bodies will take up their companion bills, according to O'Keefe.

"A number of states that we had been optimistic that legalization could happen are only focusing on coronavirus relief," she told ABC News. "We hoped this would have been a record year for marijuana legalization."

Voices diminished

Advocates say the biggest hurdle for them is the lack of access to their leaders during the pandemic, especially when it comes to decisions made during emergency sessions.

Meg Sasse Stern, the support fund director of Kentucky Health Justice Network, which advocates for reproductive rights in that state, said she was afraid when the state legislature passed a bill that would have allowed the Kentucky attorney general to restrict abortion access. Although Gov. Andrew Beshear vetoed the bill, Stern said there was no way for its opponents to speak out.

"We know that people in numbers, voicing their concern, can make the difference," she told ABC News.

Christian Heyne, the vice president of policy for the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, said they've continued to push for common-sense gun control measures throughout the country in light of reports of increased gun sales. The group was advocating the passage of a bill in Maryland that would have banned ghost guns, untraceable weapons built by a 3D printer, but that was put on hold.

Currently, the Brady Campaign is pushing California, which has reconvened its state legislature, to pass bills that track gun sales and micro stamp guns, but Heyne said it's been tricky to get lawmakers to focus on gun violence without in-person talks, rallies and other actions.

"Everything is changed, your entire legislative plans have dramatically changed," he told ABC News

Adaptation

For states where legislative work is still going on, albeit with heavy restrictions on public participation, nonprofits and advocacy groups said they had to get more creative, and in some instances, it's helped to bring more voices into the fold.

O'Keefe said her teams have been using video chat to coordinate their efforts with other MPP members and the organization's economic teams are working to update their models to show leaders how marijuana legalization would affect local economies.

She said they are also planning on strategies to pick up petitioning efforts in Montana and Arizona for ballot measures to legalize the substance once those states ease coronavirus precautions.

"If we continue the need for more social distancing, we'll see more remote advocacy and education. We can probably do some webinars," she said.

Emily Lee, the director of San Francisco Rising, a nonprofit group that advocates for various issues including immigration reform and expanded voter rights in California, said she and other groups worked to make sure their voices were heard. She helped to stage caravan rallies, where activists drove their cars in single file around San Francisco City Hall and the Capitol building in Sacramento, to advocate for tenants' rights and more safeguards to ensure that the state's upcoming elections are more accessible.

"No one will assemble in groups, but we want to make sure that these big changes are happening in the state," she told ABC News.

The biggest change that several groups have made was to their missions and campaigns. Several leaders said they've had to pivot their lobbying and outreach to remind leaders that their goals are important in a post-COVID-19 world.

McGahan noted that 40% of Georgia's residents have a misdemeanor or felony conviction and without a "second chance" bill, thousands of people will struggle to find jobs once the state recovers. She said she hopes the Georgia legislature can make the bill's passage a priority whenever it resumes.

"We understand that COVID has taken priority, but it doesn't make our issue less important for Georgia," she said.

Lee said many grassroots groups in California are ramping up their advocacy efforts and campaigns for rent reform and voter rights since the pandemic has exacerbated those issues.

"A lot of those parts of our society are hurting during this crisis and what is interesting to see is a lot of the organizations we've been working on have pivoted to work on immediate relief needs," she said.

The future

Rouse said it's unclear how state politics will operate in the coming months or even years. She did note that it is likely state legislators will be taking a long, hard look at how they conduct civic engagement.

"We're not returning to a normal we had before. The new normal will be about transformative ways we do representation," she said.

Some advocates said they feared the restrictions could widen the gap between high-powered lobbyists and grassroots groups when it comes to access to their leaders. Stern noted that leaders could have more opportunities to ignore constituents if the only way to communicate is through a phone call or video chat.

"I hope by the time the next legislative session goes into effect we are more adept at community engagement," she said.

Other advocates, on the other hand, said the adoption of new engagement methods could implore more people to participate in legislative processes.

Sixteen statehouses, including the California state Senate, Arizona House of Representatives, the New York state legislature and Minnesota state legislature, have adopted measures for remote participation and remote voting for their leaders, according to the NCSL. Heyne said this option has been beneficial for many causes since constituents have more time and easier access to their leaders.

"It's interesting we now can have people call in whereas it would have been difficult to get them to Sacramento during a hearing," he said.

Rouse predicted that more states would allow for remote discussion options for constituents in the future.

"Once the genie is out of the bottle there is no way to go back," she said.

Lobbyists become essential as Pa. debates who gets to reopen

As businesses across Pennsylvania have been shut for weeks under orders from the governor, members of at least one profession say they're busier than ever: lobbyists. And many of their new clients are trying to change or amend the shutdown order.

In normal times, lobbyists are part of the fabric of a session day in Pennsylvania's state Capitol.

They spend their time sitting in on committee meetings and hearings, often waylaying lawmakers in hallways and ducking into their offices on behalf of clients — who range from small business associations to health systems to major energy companies.

But as the coronavirus pandemic has pushed many legislators out of the Capitol and into remote, Zoom-enabled meetings and voting sessions, lobbying has changed.

According to lawmakers, and several lobbyists who spoke on and off the record, the pandemic has affected virtually every sector they represent. Where before they might have been pushing for program funding or tweaks to state laws, now they're focusing on getting industry permission to operate at all.

Laura Kuller, a lobbyist with the Ridge Policy Group for more than a decade, said a few industries have definitely been more active than usual.

"There definitely is a shift," said Kuller, speaking from her new pandemic office: a guest bedroom. "We're definitely seeing that those who are approaching us right now are, generally speaking, adversely impacted by the pandemic and by state government, or want to ensure that they're not going to be adversely impacted by state government."

A review of the new clients that lobbyists have taken on since early March show a wide range — from Axon Enterprise, Inc., which sells tasers and police body cameras, to the Pennsylvania Workforce Development Association, to the Marathon Petroleum Corporation, to Mattress Factory.

But in particular, Kuller said, she's seen a rise in pandemic-related activity from grocers, nursing homes, construction companies, manufacturers and election advocacy groups.

In some areas, those industries have seen success.

After [industry leaders put pressure on lawmakers](#) for several weeks early in the pandemic, Gov. Tom Wolf gave construction workers [special permission](#) to return to work on May 1, ahead of most other industries that he'd initially labeled "non-life-sustaining."

"I think some of that truly was...educating both the general assembly and the Wolf administration on how construction occurs," said Kuller, who noted she has been regularly working with a construction client through the pandemic.

Jim Davis, a lobbyist with Philadelphia law firm Cozen O'Connor — which also retains WHYY as a client — also said he saw a lot of construction lobbying early in the pandemic.

The Pennsylvania Builders Association, an advocacy group for construction workers, retained Davis and other Cozen O'Connor lobbyists in mid-April in hopes of pushing the state to reopen the industry more broadly. At that point, construction work was only allowed on a few projects that had been deemed essential, and those that had been granted waivers.

Cozen, Davis said, counseled the Builders Association not to focus on lobbying lawmakers, as they were already drafting bills aimed at helping the industry resume operations. Instead, they urged the organization to lobby the Wolf administration directly, and offer a phased reopening plan.

"I would like to think it was effective," Davis said. Wolf's surprise order that construction would soon be able to reopen came shortly afterward.

He added the other reasons he thinks construction saw success were twofold: ubiquity and organization.

"They are a very well-known, well-organized industry that is located throughout the state," he said. "There's a builder in every township and in every borough."

[Pennsylvania law makes it difficult](#) to see exactly which lawmakers and which bills lobbyists are trying to influence, how they're spending money, and even [how much money](#) they're spending. The pandemic hasn't helped.

It is difficult, for instance, to find exactly how much money lobbyists spent trying to contest Wolf's closure orders in the beginning of the pandemic, because the governor [waived lobbyist](#)

[disclosures](#) for the first quarter of the year. Typically, the reports, which cover January 1 to March 31, are due on April 30. Now they'll be due on the same day as Q2 disclosures — July 30.

The expenditures that have been reported only give, at best, a piecemeal view of the coronavirus-related lobbying that is being done. In 2020's Q1, the lobbyists that have so far submitted their reports spent over \$30.4 million on "direct communications" to lawmakers — i.e. one-on-one communication. They reported spending north of \$21.5 million on indirect communication, which the state classifies as any action designed to influence public opinion.

Ask lawmakers about their experience with lobbying, and you tend to get a slightly different view of the negotiations that can shape Pennsylvania policy.

State Rep. Chris Rabb (D-Phila.), for one, breaks lobbyists into two groups — the professionals, like Kuller and Davis, and "citizen lobbyists."

Lately, that second group has included a lot of individual realtors and Black barber shop owners. But he noted, not all citizens hoping to be heard by their lawmakers have an equal shot at success.

"There is a pecking order," he said. "The folks who have paid lobbyists or who have government affairs folks on this staff ... they represent constituencies that have organizations that have the money to influence legislators, more so than the average citizen."

Many realtors, he noted, belong to associations that petition the state on their behalf. Disclosures from lobbyists over the past several months show that multiple realtor groups have retained lobbyists since the pandemic began — and it's possible the move has paid off.

On Tuesday afternoon, the Wolf administration issued a statement announcing that realtors would, starting immediately, be allowed to "conduct limited business-related activities statewide."

Rabb said barber shops, on the other hand, have a tougher time getting lawmakers' ear, much less convincing the state they can operate safely.

"They're not part of a union. They're not part of any kind of formalized organization that would give them the type of institutional access or voice they need," he said.

[NewsGuild lobbying for direct federal payments to journalists faces ethics questions, political headwinds](#)

When NewsGuild members elected Jon Schleuss president of the national union in December, he planned to spend this year battling hedge fund control of newspapers and helping local chapters gather enough votes to unionize their newsrooms.

But the COVID-19 pandemic blew him off course. On Monday, he launched the union on a tricky new path: lobbying Congress and the Trump administration for direct subsidy of news media workers.

The Guild's position paper urges Congress to fund grants to be paid to individual newsroom staff members, many of whom report on the federal government and will cover proposals for funding by other interest groups. The subsidies NewsGuild proposes would be paid directly to local newspaper and online news outlet journalists, who would be required to prove financial need and that the grants made up for wage or salary cuts during the pandemic financial downturn.

News publishers have opposed this approach, proposing instead that funds flow through news organizations and that those organizations be subject to claw-back penalties if the funds are not used for newsroom payroll.

The risks of getting into lobbying are what is required at this time, Schleuss said. With more than 36,000 news media workers laid off, furloughed or facing pay reductions during the pandemic economic freeze, according to a New York Times estimate, he is seeking emergency funding to keep local journalism afloat at a time when the audience for news has never been higher.

During the pandemic, government agencies from the World Health Organization to local governments have rated local journalists essential workers and journalism an essential service. In addition to the union's campaign, there are multiple efforts underway to make up for disappearing ad revenues that used to pay newsroom salaries.

"Three months ago, I wasn't planning on engaging politically at all," Schleuss said in a Friday in advance of the ["Save The News"](#) campaign launch. He declined to detail the budget, but said the Guild's parent union, Communications Workers of America, is footing the six-figure cost of research, publicity and two professional lobbyists: one focused on Republicans in Congress and one focused on Democrats.

Meanwhile, President Donald Trump routinely calls the press "enemy of the people" and has even, this week, [attacked his reliably flattering supporters](#) at Fox News for reporting the controversy over his announcement that he is using an unproven remedy, hydroxychloroquine, to ward off COVID-19.

Schleuss left his job as a data journalist at the Los Angeles Times when he won his post and now finds himself collaborating with newspaper owners the News Guild confronts in contract talks.

The campaign is pushing Congress and the administration to enact three elements: direct federal funding of journalists, Paycheck Protection Program [loans for local news outlets left out](#) of the first round of loans and a nationwide federal ad campaign to replace newspapers' lost revenues.

It is the job of a union to testify before Congress to protect bargaining rights and improved working conditions. But Schleuss acknowledged this campaign breaks new ground in seeking direct federal payments to journalists and hiring professional lobbyists instead of using union staff and officers to make the case.

“We need to support (journalism) because it’s essential to the running of our democracy. We have to hold the government accountable,” Schleuss said Friday.

And that’s where the lobbying campaign runs into trouble with [industry ethical standards](#), which call journalists to seek truth, minimize unnecessary harm, maintain independence and be accountable to the public.

“Public confidence in journalism can be eroded even with a perception of self-interest,” said Bob Steele, co-author of the [standard journalism ethics guidebook](#) and longtime leader of the Ethics program at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies. “It’s not unusual for the Guild or owners to apply lobbying pressure. This has always been a reality,” he said. “The difficulty occurs when it’s the journalists who are seeking, in this case, government financial support via the lobbying influence of the NewsGuild.”

That could erode the credibility of journalists, said Bruce Pinkleton, dean of Washington State University’s Edward R. Murrow College of Communication.

“It made me a little queasy,” said Pinkleton of his response to the NewsGuild’s lobbying announcement “Lobbying for government support makes journalism indebted to government or appear to be indebted to government,” Pinkleton said.

He and Steele both concede the circumstances are dire, with news outlets likely to go out of business without a major cash infusion, but Steele said he’d rather see the NewsGuild lead a national campaign for reader donations and subscriptions than lobby for federal subsidies.

At The Seattle Times, where Local 82 of the NewsGuild represents workers, Executive Editor Michele Matassa Flores said she has been following social media and other discussions among journalists about the lobbying campaign.

“I don’t think we need a disclosure with every single story right now saying the Guild is out there lobbying Congress,” she said. “That would be cumbersome and we don’t know where this is leading. Should we get some relief, I think it is incumbent on us to be transparent about that.”

Although both Steele and Pinkleton said they worry critics will exploit the conflict between news business subsidies and the public’s interest, Matassa Flores said she is confident Times readers have a long track record to reflect on.

“The Seattle Times has a lot of experience with transparency around funding because of our community-funded labs,” she said. At the Seattle Times, [Education Lab](#), [Project Homeless](#), the [Investigative Journalism Fund](#) and other coverage teams are funded with reader donations, private foundation money and corporate giving. That’s an approach The Times pioneered, which includes strict rules about funder interactions with reporters.

“The work we’ve done on our community funded labs has been independent, fact-based and fearless and I think readers have come to understand that we won’t be swayed by funders or other outside forces,” she said.

Schleuss said the union has responded to ethics concerns by pledging to seek bipartisan solutions, hence the hiring of a Republican lobbyist and a Democratic lobbyist.

“It’s a historic effort to save the news,” he said. “Journalists covering national politics aren’t engaged in our advocacy efforts. But thousands of members are deeply concerned about watching our free press go extinct. So they’re engaged to save it — for our communities that depend on news.”

